

AS BETWEEN FRIENDS

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AS BETWEEN FRIENDS

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AS BETWEEN FRIENDS

CRITICISM OF THEMSELVES AND ONE
ANOTHER IN THE LETTERS OF
COLERIDGE, WORDSWORTH
AND LAMB

By BARBARA BIRKHOFF

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COLERIDGE, Wordsworth, and Lamb were friends for many years. They sent one another manuscripts for criticism, studied one another's works with pride, defended one another from their common enemies, and, after they had silenced their critics, found fault to ease their consciences. They were all voluminous letter-writers, and their general correspondence contains much of their most interesting, careful self-criticism, although their letters to one another are unique for their air of insincere veneration. Even Lamb, who loathed self-importance, treated Coleridge and Wordsworth respectfully while he was writing to them, but he enjoyed himself elsewhere at their expense with such observations as, "In Coleridge's letters you will find a good deal of amusement, to see genuine talent struggling against a pompous display of it."¹

Unaffectedly considering himself the great creative genius of the three, Wordsworth

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patronized Lamb with kindly benevolence even after the publication of the *Essays of Elia*, and Coleridge he constantly referred to as "poor, dear Coleridge." The placid self-satisfaction with which he surveyed himself in his early letters eventually froze into an unhappy pompousness. In answer to the slight criticism of one very sincere admirer Wordsworth writes, "My poems must be more nearly looked at before they can give rise to any remarks of much value, even from the strongest minds."² And Lamb reports, "Wordsworth, the great poet, is coming to town; . . . he says he does not see much difficulty in writing like Shakespeare, if he had a mind to try it. It is clear, then, nothing is wanting but the mind. Even Coleridge was a little checked at this hardihood of assertion."³ In the preface to his amusing parody, *Peter Bell*, John Hamilton Reynolds caricatured Wordsworth's self-complacency. He begins, in a truly Wordsworthian manner: "It is now a period of one-and-twenty years since I wrote some of the most perfect Compositions (except certain pieces I have written in my later days) that ever dropped from poetical pen. My heart

hath been right and powerful all its years. I never thought an evil or a weak thought in my life." ⁴

While Coleridge insisted again and again on the superiority of Wordsworth's genius to his own, he said of Lamb, or at least Lamb reported him as saying, "Poor Lamb, if he wants any *knowledge*, he may apply to me." ⁵ In his criticism of himself Coleridge was painfully modest. Lamb was self-centered, but not an egoist about his own talents, and although he was delighted by his essays and much occupied with some of his plays, he never made any pretensions about their literary value. He criticized Coleridge and Wordsworth brilliantly, even though he disliked divorcing the personality of an author from his works and felt no sympathy for either Coleridge's weakness or Wordsworth's priggish pompousness. Although, as Paul Elmer More says, ⁶ there is just a touch of mutual admiration in their criticism of one another, it is well tempered by Lamb's humor and Coleridge's rigorous theories. There is only one major exception to its accuracy: neither Coleridge nor Wordsworth had any feeling for drama, and they praised

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each other's plays with absurd and indiscriminate flattery.⁷

Wordsworth's criticism was an amazing combination of narrowness and true excellence. His judgment of *Don Juan*, for example, illustrates Hazlitt's point that "if Mr. Wordsworth had been a more liberal and candid critic, he would have been a more sterling writer."⁸ Wordsworth writes, "I am persuaded that *Don Juan* will do more harm to the English character than anything of our time; not so much as a book, but thousands, who will be ashamed to have it in that shape, will fatten upon choice bits of it in the shape of extracts."⁹ On the other hand, when Wordsworth was criticizing poetry of which he could approve, and especially poetry which was similar to his own in spirit, he seldom erred,¹⁰ for he founded his principles of criticism on his own poetry and his own point of view.

I trusted to myself, and to the principles of criticism which I drew from the practice of the great poets, and not from any observations made upon their works by professed censors. As you are so intimately acquainted with my poems, and as no change has taken place in my manner for the last forty-five years, you will not be at a loss

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to gather from them upon what principles I write, and what accordingly is likely to be my judgment of your own performances either as to subject or style.¹¹

Coleridge's criticism was far more profound than Wordsworth's or Lamb's, but it either soared above personalities or considered the individual from one particular aspect. Coleridge criticized Wordsworth only in his relation to the problem of poetic diction, through which, however, he challenged the value of all of Wordsworth's poetry. Although his final, authoritative ideas on poetic diction were not fully developed until he wrote the *Biographia Literaria*, they were foreshadowed everywhere in his letters, where his method was to pass as quickly as possible from the particular to the general, and to end with an interesting observation on theory.

A poet's heart and intellect should be *combined*, intimately combined and unified with the great appearances of nature, and not merely held in solution and loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal similes. I do not mean to exclude these formal similes; there are moods of mind in which they are natural, pleasing moods of mind, and such as a poet will often have, and sometimes express; but they are not his highest and most appropriate moods.¹²

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Even Lamb's most serious criticism proves him to be a "lounger in the garden of literature" with exquisite taste, critical talent, and many eccentric literary prejudices. He could appreciate enthusiastically¹³ but not judge, and it is remarkable how brilliant and how accurate his appreciations were.¹⁴ Twice he explains in his letters his method of criticizing and the faults of such a method:

I do not lay much claim to accurate thinking. I never judge system-wise of things, but fasten on particulars.¹⁵ . . . As to reviewing, in particular, my head is so whimsical a head, that I cannot, after reading another man's book, let it have been never so pleasing, give any account of it in any methodical way. I cannot follow his train; . . . ten thousand times I have confessed to you, talking of my talents, my utter inability to remember in any comprehensive way what I read. I can vehemently applaud, or perversely stickle, at *parts*; but I cannot grasp at a whole.¹⁶

CHARLES LAMB.

The letters of the three men contain fewest references to the works of Lamb. Although he and Coleridge corresponded voluminously from 1796 to 1798 about their poetry, Coleridge's criticism of Lamb has

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been lost, and only Lamb's occasional complaints show how outspoken Coleridge was. Lamb writes, for example, "I charge you, Coleridge, spare my ewe lambs,"¹⁷ and, "Of my last poem you speak slightly. Surely the longer stanzas were pretty tolerable."¹⁸ The only mention in Coleridge's letters of Lamb as a writer came some years later, when he referred to "Lamb, a man of uncommon genius."¹⁹

Wordsworth took more notice of Lamb's writing. To Lamb's minor works he makes a few brief references such as this:

I liked your play [*The Wife's Trial*] marvelously, having no objection to it but one which strikes me as applicable to a large majority of plays, those of Shakespeare himself not entirely excepted; I mean a little degradation of character for a more dramatic turn of plot.²⁰

He characterizes Lamb's poetry gracefully and with moderation in this fine sentence: "Charles Lamb's verses are always delightful, like everything he writes, for he both feels and thinks."²¹ There were two aspects of Lamb's literary ability that Wordsworth appreciated especially: he enjoyed Lamb's beautiful prose, for he says, "Charles Lamb,

my friend, writes prose exquisitely,"²² and he had the greatest respect for Lamb's powers as a critic. In recommending *The Excursion* he argues, as a final fact in its favor, "Charles Lamb (I cannot overlook *him*) calls it 'the best of books.'" ²³ And in a long letter to Barron Field he defended the changes he had made in several minor poems on the ground that Lamb had suggested them.²⁴

Wordsworth had no sense of humor, yet he enjoyed the *Essays of Elia*, and appreciated them gravely and conscientiously.

I have to thank you and Moxon for a delightful volume, not I hope your last, of *Elia*. I have read it all, except some of the popular fallacies which I reserve, not to get through my cake all at once. The book has much pleased the whole of my family.²⁵ . . . Tell Lamb that his works are our delight, as is evidenced better than by words, by April weather of smiles and tears whenever we read them.²⁶

Although he was no egoist, Lamb cherished his talents in a way incomprehensible to the prodigal Coleridge. In his letters he refers constantly to even his unimportant projects. The following quotation is typical not so much of the references as of Lamb's attitude toward this aspect of his work:

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I shall have to send you, in a week or two, two volumes of Juvenile Poetry; . . . we have almost worked ourselves out of child's work, and I don't know what to do. Sometimes I think of a drama, but I have no head for play-making; I can do the dialogue, and that's all. I am quite aground for a plan.²⁷

He speaks of his *Adventures of Ulysses* with some enthusiasm: "Chapman is divine, and my abridgment has not quite emptied him of his divinity."²⁸

In spite of his failures, Lamb cherished his plays. His letters hold many notes such as this:

I am busy with a farce [*The Wife's Trial*], in two acts; the incidents tragi-comic. I can do the dialogue *commey-for*; but the damned plot — I believe I must omit it altogether. The scenes come after one another like geese, not marshalling like cranes or a Hyde Park review.²⁹

Lamb understood why *Mr. H.* failed, for he says, "The subject was not substantial enough. John Bull must have solider fare than a *letter*."³⁰ Lamb's early letters contain pages of comment on his youthful, unimportant poetry. Even then he complained that he was "dismally slow and sterile of ideas."³¹ His later poems he either ignored

or dismissed with a joke.³² Of his minor works the most influential was *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets contemporary with Shakespeare*, which he mentions with real satisfaction, saying, "The book is such as I am glad there should be."³³

Lamb enjoyed his *Essays of Elia* thoroughly, and referred to them with delight. He often gave his friends an intimation of what he was writing in such a sentence as, "Thou wilt see a funny passage, and yet a true history, of George Dyer's aquatic incursion in the next *London*."³⁴ Sometimes he makes a longer commentary like this:

I am glad you liked my new year's speculations: everybody likes them, except the author of the *Pleasures of Hope*. Disappointment attend him! How I like to be liked, and *what I do* to be liked! They flatter me in magazines, newspapers, and all the minor reviews; the Quarterlies hold aloof. But they must come into it in time, or their leaves will be waste paper.³⁵

Nearly all of these notes are amusing and full of Lamb's own peculiar humor. Another typical example is: "I poke out a monthly crudity for Colburn in his magazine, which I call 'Popular Fallacies,' and periodically crush a proverb or two, setting up my folly

against the wisdom of nations.”³⁶ And he was delighted when his friends identified themselves with characters from the *Essays*, for he says: “The blunders of personal application are ludicrous. I send out a character every now and then, on purpose to exercise the ingenuity of my friends.”³⁷

Like Coleridge, Lamb was courageous enough to realize when his inspiration left him. “They have dragged me again into the Magazine,” he admits, “but I feel the spirit of the thing in my own mind quite gone. ‘Some brains’ (I think Ben Jonson says it) ‘will endure but one skimming.’”³⁸ And later Lamb writes, “I do not like to go on writing worse & worse, & feeling that I do so. I want to try something else.”³⁹

COLERIDGE

Lamb’s letters contain some fine criticism of Coleridge. In theory Wordsworth admired Coleridge, but in practice he looked down on him, and the little criticism to be found in his letters is not discerning, although it is true enough. Coleridge generally ignored his own work. His only remark on his tragedy, *Remorse*, is character-

istic of what Lamb called his tendency to Coleridgeize.⁴⁰

I have been so lucky as to discover among Mr. Godwin's books the copy of my Tragedy. . . . I was very much pleased with it; still more pleased that I could see at once what its faults were, and that a week's labor would completely remove them.⁴¹

Among his newspapers Coleridge had especially exalted ambitions for *The Friend*. He explains:

I do not write in this Work for the multitude of men but for those who either by rank or fortune, or official situation or by talents and habits of reflection, are to influence the multitude. I write to found true *principles*, to oppose false *principles* in legislation, philosophy, morals, international law.⁴²

Then, as usual, when the first few numbers had appeared, he was disappointed, and complains in his letters, "*The Friend* — the first six numbers at least — is partly chargeable with obscurity and heaviness of movement in its periods — too often with an *entortillage* or intertwisting both of thoughts and sentences."⁴³

There is this note of disappointment in all of Coleridge's self-criticism. Sometimes it

was caused by a lack of public recognition, as in the following quotation about his lectures on Shakespeare:

I delivered 18 lectures on Shakespeare, at the Royal institution — three-fourths of which appeared at that time startling paradoxes, which have since been adopted even by the men who at the time made use of them as proofs of my flighty and paradoxical turn of mind.⁴⁴

More often Coleridge's disappointment came from a realization of his own faults. In his prose style he complains of "an *entortillage* in the sentences and even in the thought (which nothing can justify), and always almost, a stately piling up of *story* on *story* in one architectural period."⁴⁵ And about his poetry he says: "I cannot write without *body* of *thought*. Hence my poetry is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burden of ideas and imagery! It has seldom ease."⁴⁶

In the whole course of his letters Coleridge referred but once to "The Ancient Mariner"⁴⁷ and never to "Kubla Khan"; and "Christabel" was the only one of his poems which he criticized. He calls it "the lovely lady,"⁴⁸ and says that the "best and sweetest lines"⁴⁹ he ever wrote are those on divided friendship,

beginning, "Alas! they had been Friends in Youth." ⁵⁰

His three long comments on "Christabel" are characteristic of all his self-criticism; the first relates it to the theory on which it was founded; the second compares it to Wordsworth's compositions unfavorably; and the third foreshadows his unhappy realization that he was to write little more poetry.

The "Christabel" was running up to 1,300 lines, ⁵¹ and was so much admired by Wordsworth, that he thought it indelicate to print two volumes with his name; . . . and, which was of more consequence, the poem was in direct opposition to the very purpose for which the lyrical ballads were published, viz., an experiment to see how far those passions which alone give any value to extraordinary incidents were capable of interesting, in and for themselves, in the incidents of common life. . . . I assure you I think very differently of "Christabel." I would have rather written "Ruth," and "Nature's Lady," than a million such poems. But why do I calumniate my own spirit by saying "I would rather"? God knows it is as delightful to me that they *are* written. ⁵²

The third and final quotation about "Christabel" is charged like the poem itself with what Pater called "that faintness and obscure

dejection which clung like some contagious damp to all his work.”⁵³

The delay in copy has been owing in part to me as the writer of *Christabel*,— Every line has been produced by me with labor pangs. I abandon poetry altogether. I leave the higher and deeper kinds to Wordsworth, the delightful, popular, and simply dignified to Southey, and reserve for myself the honourable attempt to make others feel and understand their writings, as they deserve to be felt and understood.⁵⁴

The *Biographia Literaria* occupied Coleridge's thoughts long before he actually wrote it. The first hints that he was thinking about it come in such passages as this:

I rather suspect that somewhere or other there is a radical difference in our [Wordsworth's and his] theoretical notions respecting poetry; this I shall endeavor to go to the bottom of, and, acting the arbitrator between the old school and the new school, hope to lay down some plain and perspicuous, though not superficial canons of criticism respecting poetry.⁵⁵

Later, but still before he began the *Biographia Literaria*, he says that he is planning to write

Biographical Sketches of my literary life and opinions (with the principles on which they are grounded and the arguments by which they were

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deduced) in politics, religion, philosophy, and *poetry* — the latter in the hope of settling the controversy on the nature of *poetic* diction. I fear that my reasonings may not please Wordsworth; but I am convinced that the detection of the faults in his poetry is indispensable, to a rational appreciation of his merits.⁵⁶

In one very unhappy letter Coleridge admits that he has lost his inspiration:

As to myself, all my poetic genius (if ever I really possessed any *genius*, and it was not rather a mere general *aptitude* of talent, and quickness of imitation) is gone, and I have been fool enough to suffer deeply in my mind, regretting the loss, which I attribute to my long and exceedingly severe metaphysical investigations, and these partly to ill-health, and partly to private afflictions which rendered any subjects, immediately connected with feeling, a source of pain and disquiet to me.⁵⁷

In spite of Wordsworth's "poor, dear Coleridge" attitude, he admired Coleridge genuinely and referred to him in such terms as "one of the foremost intellects that Great Britain has produced,"⁵⁸ and "my friend, Coleridge, whose genius, talents and comprehensive knowledge are well known to you."⁵⁹ That Wordsworth owed his greatest poetry to the inspiration of companionship with

Coleridge is proved, I believe, partly by the sudden fall in the quality of his poetry after Coleridge's final departure for London in 1807, and partly by the following two statements which Wordsworth would never have made unless they had been more than justified by the truth. Wordsworth writes, "Should Coleridge return, so that I might have some conversation with him on the subject [*The Recluse*], I should go on swimmingly," ⁶⁰ and, "He [*Coleridge*] and my beloved sister are the two beings to whom my intellect is most indebted." ⁶¹

The only reference in Wordsworth's letters to Coleridge's prose is, "Coleridge also has produced noble passages." ⁶² Wordsworth mentions Coleridge's poetry just twice. With what Lamb called "true author's hypocrisy," ⁶³ he writes to Coleridge: "Take no pains to contradict the story that the L. B. [*Lyrical Ballads*] are entirely yours. Such a rumour is the best thing that can befall them." ⁶⁴ But to the publisher, Joseph Cottle, he says, "From what I can gather it seems that *The Ancyent Marinere* has, on the whole, been an injury to the volume; I mean that the old words and strangeness of it have

deterred readers from going on" ⁶⁵ — an attitude that he voiced publicly in the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, writing in a note to "The Ancient Mariner," "The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects." ⁶⁶

Lamb's criticism of Coleridge was much superior to Wordsworth's. A more honest critic than Wordsworth, he was able to divorce the protective, condescending attitude which everyone felt for Coleridge's uneasy vacillations from his appreciation of Coleridge's genius. On the other hand, however great a poet Lamb thought Coleridge, his poetry was not of the sort to which Lamb was naturally sympathetic. He did not like its luxurious, dreamlike, and mystical qualities, which, he thought, prevented it from ever belonging to the highest rank of poetry. Lamb had an ineradicable suspicion of mysticism. ⁶⁷

Until 1798, when they quarrelled, unfortunately just before the publication of the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Lamb read everything Coleridge wrote, and commented on it in detail. He was enthusiastic over all of Coleridge's early work, but he saw its defects and insisted on them even in the

middle of his most glowing praises. Two characteristic comments on the *Religious Musings*, his favorite poem at the time, are these:

When I read the *Religious Musings*, I think how poor, how unelevated, unoriginal, my blank verse is.⁶⁸ . . . I have re-read the extract from the *Religious Musings*, and retract whatever invidious there was in my censure of it as elaborate.⁶⁹

Most of Lamb's objections to Coleridge's poetry arose from Coleridge's fondness for elaboration; his most interesting comment on this question is the following:

Cultivate simplicity, Coleridge; or rather, I should say, banish elaborateness; for simplicity springs spontaneous from the heart, and carries into daylight its own modest buds, and genuine, sweet, and clear flowers of expression. I allow no hot-beds in the gardens of Parnassus.⁷⁰

Lamb was only twenty-one at this time, and yet his criticism was already self-confident and firm. Its precocious maturity appears in his earliest letters, where the criticism is often amazingly penetrating.

Coleridge, I want you to write an epic poem. Nothing short of it can satisfy the vast capacity of true poetic genius. Having one great end to direct all your poetical faculties to, and on which

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to lay out your hopes, your ambition will show you to what you are equal; . . . you have learning, you have fancy, you have enthusiasm, you have strength, and amplitude of wing enow for flights like those I recommend. In the vast and unexplored regions of fairy-land there is ground enough unfound and uncultivated: search there.⁷¹

“Sublime” is the typical word that Lamb applied to Coleridge’s prose. Aside from a number of minor references, however, he mentioned it only once, to say about the volume now called *Aids to Reflection*:

Coleridge’s book is in good part printed, but it sticks for *more copy*. It bears the unsaleable title, “Extracts from Bishop Leighton;” but I am confident there will be plenty of good notes in it, more of Bishop Coleridge than Leighton, I hope; for what is Leighton? ⁷²

Lamb’s casual criticism of Coleridge’s great poems was among the best that he wrote. That of “Kubla Khan” suggests in a delightful, matter-of-fact way the elusive, dreamlike quality of the poem, which the most delicate or elaborate descriptions could not have expressed better:

Coleridge is printing “Christabel” . . . with what he calls a vision, “Kubla Khan,” which said vision he repeats so enchantingly that it irradiates and brings heaven and elysian bowers into

my parlor while he sings or says it; but there is an observation, "Never tell thy dreams," and I am almost afraid that "Kubla Khan" is an owl that won't bear daylight. I fear lest it should be discovered by the lantern of typography and clear reducting to letters no better than nonsense or no sense.⁷³

Lamb's criticism of "The Ancient Mariner," his favorite among Coleridge's poems, is unusually sensitive and discerning. He wrote a trivial but amusing comment when he heard of Coleridge's intention to call it a "Poet's Reverie," which, says Lamb, would be "as bad as Bottom the Weaver's declaration that he is not a lion, but only the scenical representation of a lion."⁷⁴ Of Lamb's other two passages of criticism the first emphasizes an aspect of "The Ancient Mariner" which has almost been forgotten now, that is, its relation to German metaphysical writings.

For me (Lamb writes), I was never so affected with any human tale. After first reading it, I was totally possessed with it for many days. I dislike all the miraculous part of it; but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery, dragged me along like Tom Pipe's magic whistle.⁷⁵

Lamb's second piece of criticism is addressed to Southey.

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If you wrote that review in the *Critical Review*, I am sorry you are so sparing of praise to the *Ancient Mariner*. So far from calling it as you do, with some wit but more severity, a "Dutch Attempt," etc., I call it a right English attempt, and a successful one, to dethrone German sublimity. You have selected a passage fertile in unmeaning miracles, but have passed by fifty passages as miraculous as the miracles they celebrate. I never felt so deeply the pathetic as in that part,

"A spring of love gush'd from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware."

It stung me into high pleasure through sufferings.⁷⁶

That is great criticism. While it has none of the completeness of an essay, it strikes what Pater would call the formula of the poem, and by its delicate suggestion it creates an instantaneous impression of accuracy and beauty.

WORDSWORTH

With the exception of a few brilliant lines and one very amusing letter, Lamb's criticism of Wordsworth was relatively inferior; but Coleridge criticized him so extremely well, and Wordsworth criticized himself so thoroughly, that on the whole he is treated in the letters more adequately than either

of the other men. Because Wordsworth demanded judicious praise instead of light-hearted, enthusiastic understanding, Lamb's criticism was reliable, but not glowing or spirited as it was at its best. Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth was the finest that he ever wrote, and superior to that of the other two men not only in degree but in kind. It contains the essence of what he later expanded into the *Biographia Literaria*, expressed resolutely and clearly. Wordsworth referred to his own work with such persistence that the following quotations from his letters have had to be selected from many times their number. He not only outlined his plans,⁷⁷ but he told each correspondent the theme of his current poem, how many lines of the poem were written, and how well he liked it. Wordsworth spent scores of pages thanking his admirers for their eager applause⁷⁸ and justifying, praising, and explaining unimportant lines of minor poems.⁷⁹

Coleridge's first letters contain nothing but admiration for Wordsworth and his poetry. He was devoted to Wordsworth, for whose fame, as he said himself later, he "felt

and fought with an ardour that amounted to absolute self oblivion.”⁸⁰ He looked on Wordsworth as in every way superior to himself.

Wordsworth is a very great man, the only man to whom *at all times and in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior⁸¹ . . . I speak with heartfelt sincerity, and (I think) unblinded judgment, when I tell you that I feel myself *a little man by his side*, and yet do not think myself the less man than I formerly thought myself.⁸²

Coleridge's ardor began to disappear with the publication of the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he complained of an occasional “daring humbleness of language and versification, and a strict adherence to matter of fact, even to prolixity,”⁸³ that, he said, startled him. But although he criticized Wordsworth's faults freely, he never ceased to admire him. Until the day of his death he considered Wordsworth the greatest English poet after Milton,⁸⁴ and his objections to Wordsworth's theory and practice of poetic diction were only incidental.

Twice in his letters Coleridge commented at length on the general nature of Wordsworth's poetry, once in relation to *The Ex-*

cursion, when he felt least favorably towards Wordsworth, and once in relation to Wordsworth's preëminence as a poet. Both references are very fine criticism, and both indicate Coleridge's preference for the *Prelude* and Wordsworth's minor poems to *The Excursion*. Wordsworth, as usual, had an explanation for this heresy: he "much doubted" if Coleridge had read even three pages of *The Excursion*.⁸⁵ But Coleridge must have read more than three pages, for he writes:⁸⁶

I can truly say that one half the number of its [*The Excursion's*] beauties would make all the beauties of his contemporary poets collectively mount to the balance:—but yet—the fault may be in my own mind—I do not think, I did not feel, it equal to the work on the growth of his own spirit. As proofs meet me in every part of "The Excursion" that the poet's genius has not flagged, I have sometimes fancied that, having by the conjoint operation of his own experiences, feelings, and reason, *himself* convinced *himself* of truths, which the generality of persons have either taken for granted from their infancy, or, at least, adopted in early life, he has attached all their own depth and weight to doctrines and words, which come almost as truisms or common-places to others.⁸⁷ . . . He is . . . the first and greatest philosophical poet, the only man who who has affected a complete and constant synthesis of thought and feeling and combined them

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with poetic forms, with the music of pleasurable passion, and with Imagination or the *modifying* power. . . . Wordsworth is a poet, and I feel myself a better poet, in knowing how to honour *him* than in all my own poetic compositions, all I have done or hope to do; and I prophesy immortality to his "Recluse," as the first and finest philosophical poem, if only it be (as it undoubtedly will be) a faithful transcript of his own most august and innocent life, of his own habitual feelings and modes of seeing and hearing.⁸⁸

Coleridge expressed his objections to Wordsworth's writing no less clearly than his praise, and commented bitterly on Wordsworth's noble character and self-imposed, grandiose isolation, saying:

My many weaknesses are of some advantage to me; they unite me more with the great mass of my fellow-beings — but dear Wordsworth appears to me to have hurtfully segregated and isolated his being. Doubtless his delights are more deep and sublime; but he has likewise more hours that prey upon the flesh and blood.⁸⁹

An important effect of Wordsworth's isolation was his inability to understand the ordinary reader, and so, says Coleridge, his style "represents the chain of his thoughts and the movements of his heart, admirably for me and a few others, but I fear does not pos-

sess the more profitable excellence of translating these down into that style, which might easily convey them to the understandings of common readers.”⁹⁰ Coleridge complained of the obscurity of Wordsworth’s style, especially in the preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which, he writes, was “obscure beyond any necessity,”⁹¹ and adds, “The extreme elaboration and almost constrainedness of the diction contrasted (to my feelings) somewhat harshly to the general style of the Poems.”⁹² Concerning this same preface Coleridge says:

But I will apprise you of one thing, that although Wordsworth’s Preface is half a child of my own brain, and arose out of conversations so frequent that, with few exceptions, we could scarcely either of us, perhaps, positively say which first started any particular thought, . . . yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth.⁹³

And finally Coleridge expresses his own opinion about poetic diction:

In my opinion, every phrase, every metaphor, every personification, should have its justifying clause in some *passion*, either of the poet’s mind or of the characters described by the poet. But metre in itself implies a passion, that is, a state of excitement both in the poet’s mind, and is ex-

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pected, in part, of the reader; and, though I stated this to Wordsworth, and he has in some sort stated it in his preface, yet he has not done justice to it, nor has he, in my opinion, sufficiently answered it. In my opinion, poetry justifies as poetry, independent of any other passion, some new combinations of language and *commands* the omission of many others allowable in other compositions. Now Wordsworth, *me saltem judice*, has in his system not sufficiently admitted the former, and in his practice has too frequently sinned against the latter.⁹⁴

Wordsworth mentions his prefaces in his letters only to say placidly that they contain "many important observations upon poetry."⁹⁵

The most convenient references for beginning a discussion of Wordsworth's voluminous self-criticism are those to the second and third Yarrow poems, which, Wordsworth admits reluctantly, are inferior to "Yarrow Unvisited." Never elsewhere in his letters did Wordsworth acknowledge the inferiority of one poem to another, or even recognize a single weakness of his poetry. He begins, "We think it ["Yarrow Visited"] heavier than my things generally are,"⁹⁶ and a few days later writes again, "I was anxious that there should be no falling off; but that

was unavoidable, perhaps, from the subject, as imagination almost always transcends reality.”⁹⁷ Seventeen years later, when he had completed the series with “Yarrow Revisited,” he writes:

It is in the same measure [as the other two poems], and as much in the same spirit as matter of fact would allow. You are artist enough to know that it is next to impossible entirely to harmonize things that rest upon their poetic credibility, and are idealized by distance of time and space, with those that rest upon the evidence of the hour, and have about them the thorny points of actual life.⁹⁸

Wordsworth judged his lyrics with the calm satisfaction of a really great man. What he said was true, impersonal, and well expressed, and he singled out for his highest admiration two little poems that have appealed especially to both public and critics ever since. “The Daffodils” and “The Rock Crowned with Snowdrops” :

I am sure that whoever is pleased with either of these quiet and tender delineations must be fitted to walk through the recesses of my poetry with delight, and will there recognize, at every turn, something or other in which, and over which, it has that property and right which knowledge and love confer.⁹⁹

In his criticism of his finest poems Wordsworth was always just; neither Coleridge nor Lamb had the ability to see their best work so clearly and to realize its purpose and its value with such disinterested understanding. But Wordsworth's criticism of his inferior compositions was blind and sanctimonious. The following quotations show both tendencies of his criticism, on the one hand to be intelligent and perceptive and on the other, to be smug:

The poems ["The Brothers" and "Michael"] are faithful copies from Nature; and I hope whatever effect they may have on you, you will at least be able to perceive that they may excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts, and may in some small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species, and our knowledge of human nature, by showing that our best qualities are possessed by men whom we are too apt to consider, not with reference to the points in which they resemble us, but to those in which they manifestly differ from us.¹⁰⁰

Wordsworth took special pains to explain the purpose of "The White Doe of Rylstone," for fear that it would be misunderstood by even sympathetic readers, and he informed each correspondent what emotions it should

arouse. The best criticism of "The White Doe" is this:

Of *The White Doe* I have little to say, but that I hope it will be acceptable to the intelligent, for whom alone it is written. It starts from a high point of imagination, and comes round through various wanderings of that faculty to a still higher; nothing less than the apotheosis of the animal, who gives the first of the two titles to the poem. And as the poem thus begins and ends with pure and lofty imagination, every motive and impulse that actuates the persons introduced is from the same source. . . . Thus the poetry, if there be any in the work, proceeds whence it ought to do, from the soul of man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.¹⁰¹

Another poem that Wordsworth felt to need explanation was the "Idiot Boy"; at the end of a long, explanatory letter to Sir George Beaumont his final argument in its favor is, "I wrote the poem with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure."¹⁰² He mentioned "Peter Bell" only once, although it is such a typical poem that Lord Byron characterized Wordsworth as one who "season'd his peddler poems with democracy."¹⁰³

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No poem of mine will ever be popular. . . . I say this not in modest disparagement of the poem ["Peter Bell"], but in sorrow for the sickly taste of the public in verse. The *people* would love the poem of Peter Bell, but the *public* (a very different being) will never love it.¹⁰⁴

Of all his poems, *The Excursion* was Wordsworth's favorite. He mentioned it twice as often as he did the others. He told of its origin,¹⁰⁵ outlined his plans for it,¹⁰⁶ wrote several three or four page letters explaining the philosophy on which it was based,¹⁰⁷ and spent the last twenty or so years of his life preparing successive editions of it for the press.

Besides these comments on individual poems Wordsworth's letters contain some excellent passages of general interest. There is one, for example, on the duty of a great poet, and for what qualities he is to be judged great:

U/ose You have given me praise for having reflected faithfully in my poems the feelings of human nature. I would fain hope I have done so. But a great poet ought to do more than this: he ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, — in short, more consonant to nature, and the great

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moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides.¹⁰⁸

In another place Wordsworth described the effect of his poetry on its readers, and how they always return to it if they have once enjoyed it. He writes:

I have heard of many who, upon their first acquaintance with my poetry, have had much to get over before they could thoroughly relish it; but never of one who, having once learned to enjoy it, had ceased to value it or survived his admiration. This is as good an external assurance as I can desire that my inspiration is from a pure source, and that my principles of composition are trustworthy.¹⁰⁹

In another letter he casually noted, as Pater did sixty years later,¹¹⁰ for what kind of readers his poetry is best suited:

My poetry, less than any other of the day, is adapted to the taste of the luxurious, and of those who value themselves on the privilege of wealth and station. And though it be true that several passages are too abstruse for the ordinary reader, yet the main body of it is as well fitted (if my aim be not altogether missed) to the bulk of the people — both in sentiment and language — as that of any of my contemporaries.¹¹¹

Wordsworth had no false modesty; no one appreciated his poetry more than he did him-

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self, and no one could have expressed such appreciation as effectively. One of the finest passages of criticism that Wordsworth wrote was about the mission of his poetry. He might have been writing it from another world into which no considerations of personality entered.

Trouble not yourself about their [his poems'] present reception; of what moment is that compared with what I trust is their destiny? to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight, by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel; and, therefore, to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform, long after we . . . are mouldered in our graves.¹¹²

But much of the time Wordsworth was blind to his own weaknesses; ¹¹³ anything he wrote was sacred to him. He could say with perfect sincerity, "Why, let the poet first consult his own heart, as I have done, and leave the rest to posterity, — to, I hope, an improving posterity." ¹¹⁴ An extreme example of his fond and complacent opinion of himself is this:

These sonnets, while they each fix the attention upon some important sentiment, separately con-

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sidered, do, at the same time, collectively make a poem on the subject of civil liberty and national independence, which, either for simplicity of style or grandeur of moral sentiment, is, alas! likely to have few parallels in the poetry of the present day.¹¹⁵

And besides this, Wordsworth referred again and again to his most stupid poems with obvious pleasure, and, as Walter Raleigh says, “took a keen delight in crooning over to himself his least admired compositions —

Like a river murmuring
And talking to itself when all things else
Were still.¹¹⁶

One of the most amusing letters Lamb ever wrote illustrates how much Wordsworth resented unfavorable criticism. Wordsworth sent Lamb a copy of the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, for which Lamb returned thanks, saying that he was not moved as forcibly by any single piece as he had been by “The Ancient Mariner,” “The Mad Mother,” and “Lines at Tintern Abbey” in the first edition. According to Lamb, Wordsworth, who had delayed for many months in thanking Lamb for a certain tragedy, “owing to an ‘almost insurmountable aversion

from Letter-writing,'” answered by the next post.

He [Wordsworth] was “compelled to wish that my range of sensibility was more extended, being obliged to believe that I should receive large influxes of happiness and happy Thoughts” (I suppose from the L. B.) — with a deal of stuff about a certain Union of Tenderness and Imagination, which in the sense he used Imagination was not the characteristic of Shakespeare, but which Milton possessed in a degree far exceeding other Poets: which Union, as the highest species of Poetry, and chiefly deserving that name, “He was most proud to aspire to.”

Then Wordsworth inspired Coleridge to complain too.

This was not to be *all* my castigation (Lamb continues). Coleridge, who had not written to me some months before, starts up from his bed of sickness to reprove me for my hardy presumption: four long pages, equally sweaty and more tedious, came from him; assuring me that, when the works of a man of true genius such as W. undoubtedly was, do not please me at first sight, I should suspect the fault to lie “in me and not in them,” etc., etc., etc., etc., etc. What am I to do with such people? ¹¹⁷

No one but Wordsworth would have objected to Lamb’s letter of comment and thanks. Lamb discussed various poems with

penetration and sympathy, and his harshest criticism was about "The Cumberland Beggar," of which he writes:

I will mention one more — the delicate and curious feeling in the wish for the "Cumberland Beggar," that he may have about him the melody of birds, although he hear them not. Here the mind knowingly passes a fiction upon herself, first substituting her own feeling for the Beggar's, and in the same breath detecting the fallacy, will not part with the wish. . . . I will just add that it appears to me a fault in the "Beggar," that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct, and like a lecture: they don't slide into the mind of the reader while he is imagining no such matter. An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told, "I will teach you how to think on this subject."¹¹⁸

Lamb sums up this volume in his letter to Wordsworth as "eminently good, and your own." But because Wordsworth was disgruntled, Lamb justified his opinion to his own friends. He writes Thomas Manning, for example:

It [the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*] is full of original thinking and an observing mind, but it does not often make you laugh or cry. — It too artfully aims at simplicity of expression. And you sometimes doubt if Simplicity be not a cover for Poverty.¹¹⁹

Aside from this, Lamb's criticism of Wordsworth is unimportant, although it contains some fine *aperçus*. He liked nearly everything Wordsworth wrote, and commented in detail on many of Wordsworth's minor compositions. He chose for his special praise those poems which are now generally acknowledged to be among the finest that Wordsworth wrote, such as "Tintern Abbey," "Michael," and "The Mad Mother," but unfortunately Lamb did little more than mention them. He spoke pleasantly of "Laodamia,"¹²⁰ and was especially affected by that one simile in the "Four Yew Trees" that Walter Raleigh admired — "Death the Skeleton and Time the Shadow."¹²¹ His criticism of "Yarrow Visited" is acute and sensitive. After praising the stanza beginning, "But thou that didst appear so fair," he continues, "Yet the poem, on the whole, seems condemned to leave behind it a melancholy of imperfect satisfaction, as if you had wronged the feeling with which, in what preceded it, you had resolved never to visit it, and as if the Muse had determined, in the most delicate manner, to make you, and *scarce make you feel it*."¹²²

Lamb wrote several letters ¹²³ to Wordsworth about *The Excursion*, in one of which he dared to be humorous, saying:

There is a great deal of noble matter about mountain scenery, yet not so much as to overpower and discountenance a poor Londoner or south-countryman entirely, though Mary seems to have felt it occasionally a little too powerfully, for it was her remark during reading it, that by your system it was doubtful whether a liver in towns had a soul to be saved. She almost trembled for that invisible part of us in her.¹²⁴

But quickly adding with due gravity that he has received a "calm and noble enjoyment from it,"¹²⁵ he passed on to a discussion of its minor beauties. Lamb's last comment on Wordsworth is in his best manner, delicate and sure; in a brief line it sums up the best qualities of Wordsworth's poetry: "Why, a line of Wordsworth's is a lever to lift the immortal spirit!"¹²⁶

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Although the criticism in the letters of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Lamb is not complete, it is of a very high quality. Wordsworth never wrote any criticism more discerning than that in some of his passages about himself. Lamb put some very fine criticism

in his letters, spontaneous, brilliant, and intuitive, but the glimpses of it are fragmentary in comparison to what can easily be found in his essays. Coleridge's criticism appeared at its best: it was always just, but the natural limitations of any correspondence demanded that it be concise and explicit as well. The critical opinions of all three men, and especially those of Coleridge and Lamb, have been corroborated by later critics. Most readers think of Coleridge as vacillating and insignificant in character, but he appears throughout the letters, in spite of his great weaknesses, to be much more than Lamb's "archangel, a little damaged"; in vision, in intellectual power, and as a person he stands out above either Wordsworth or Lamb.

NOTES

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1. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 198.
2. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, I, 330.
3. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 298.
4. J. Hamilton Reynolds, *Poetry and Prose*,
p. 75.
5. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 88.
6. *Shelburne Essays*, Fourth Series, p. 161.
7. See *Letters from the Lake Poets*, p. 9; Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 221; *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, III, 244.
8. Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, p. 132.
9. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, II, 168.
10. Cf. Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, First Series, p. 3.
11. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, III, 268.
12. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 404.
13. Cf. More, *Shelburne Essays*, Fourth Series,
p. 159; see also p. 162.
14. Cf. Augustine Birrell, *Res Judicatæ*, p. 228.
15. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 112.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
19. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 111.
20. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, II, 405.
21. *Ibid.*, III, 40.
22. *Ibid.*, II, 76.
23. *Ibid.*, II, 46.
24. *Ibid.*, III, 414-415.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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26. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
27. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 305; see also pp. 292-293.
28. *Ibid.*, II, 176.
29. *Ibid.*, II, 173.
30. *Ibid.*, I, 290.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
32. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 244.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 295. Cf. Pater, *Appreciations*, p. 114.
34. Lamb, *Letters*, II, 92.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 59; see also pp. 110-111, 133-134, 299.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
39. W. C. Hazlitt, *Lamb and Hazlitt*, p. 150.
40. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 79.
41. Stuart, *Letters from the Lake Poets*, p. 65.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
43. *Letters Hitherto Uncollected*, ed. W. F. Prideaux, p. 8.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
45. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 551.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 112. Cf. Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, p. 38.
47. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 696.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 609. Cf. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 328.
50. "Christabel," Part Two, line 77.
51. It is impossible to explain this statement. The discarded portion, if it ever existed, has never come to light.
52. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 337.
53. Pater, *Appreciations*, p. 85.

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54. *Letters Hitherto Uncollected*, ed. W. F. Prideaux, p. 11.

55. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 387.

56. Stuart, *Letters from the Lake Poets*, p. 244.

Cf. Raleigh, *Wordsworth*, p. 88.

57. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 388; see also Stuart, *Letters from Lake Poets*, pp. 241-242.

58. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, II, 208.

59. *Ibid.*, I, 382.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

61. *Ibid.*, II, 498.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

63. Lamb, *Letters*, II, 145.

64. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, III, 451.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 364.

66. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, Second Edition, vol. I, note to "The Ancient Mariner."

67. Lamb, *Letters*, I, pp. 39, 40, 41.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 46; see also p. 4.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 66. It must be remembered that Lamb wrote this in January, 1797.

72. *Ibid.*, II, 100.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 177. It was because of Lamb that Coleridge finally called the poem "The Ancient Mariner" and not a "Poet's Reverie."

75. *Ibid.*, p. 177, written in reply to some unfavorable criticism from Wordsworth.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 100. Cf. Pater, *Appreciations*, p. 100.

77. See *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, I, pp. 115, 161, 173.

78. See *Ibid.*, I, 157; III, 398.

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79. See *Ibid.*, I, 330; III, 412-420, 441.
80. *Letters Hitherto Uncollected*, ed. W. F. Pri-
deaux, p. 37.
81. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 224.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 221; see also Stuart, *Letters from
the Lake Poets*, pp. 167-168.
83. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 386.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 734.
85. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, II, 45.
86. Hazlitt was the only critic who agreed thor-
oughly with Coleridge then. Cf. Hazlitt, *Lec-
tures on the English Poets*, p. 309; Arnold, *Essays
in Criticism*, Second Series, p. 135.
87. Coleridge, *Letters*, pp. 641-642; see also
pp. 645-648.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 450.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
90. Stuart, *Letters from the Lake Poets*, p. 168.
91. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 387. Jeffrey in the
"Edinburgh Review" of November, 1814 (*Con-
tributions to the Edinburgh Review*, p. 458) also
comments on this unfortunate effect of Words-
worth's isolation.
92. Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 387.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 386.
94. *Ibid.*, pp. 374-375; see also p. 678.
95. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, III, 312.
96. *Ibid.*, II, 34.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 467.
99. *Ibid.*, I, 308.
100. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
101. *Ibid.*, II, 68; see also III, 466.
102. *Ibid.*, III, 439.
103. *Don Juan*, canto iii, stanza 93, line 4.

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104. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, I, 329.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
107. *Ibid.*, II, 40-43, 54-55.
108. *Ibid.*, III, 439.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
110. Pater, *Uncollected Essays*, p. 68.
111. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, II, 430.
112. *Ibid.*, I, 303.
113. Cf. Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, p. 135.
114. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, I, 330.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 304; see also pp. 305-307; III, 150.
116. Raleigh, *Wordsworth*, p. 3.
117. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 180-182.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
119. *Ibid.*, p. 182; see also p. 178.
120. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
121. *Ibid.*, p. 340. Cf. Raleigh, *Wordsworth*, p. 106.
122. Lamb, *Letters*, I, 344.
123. *Ibid.*, pp. 328-331, 337-339.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
126. *Ibid.*, II, 107.

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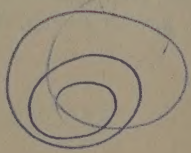
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